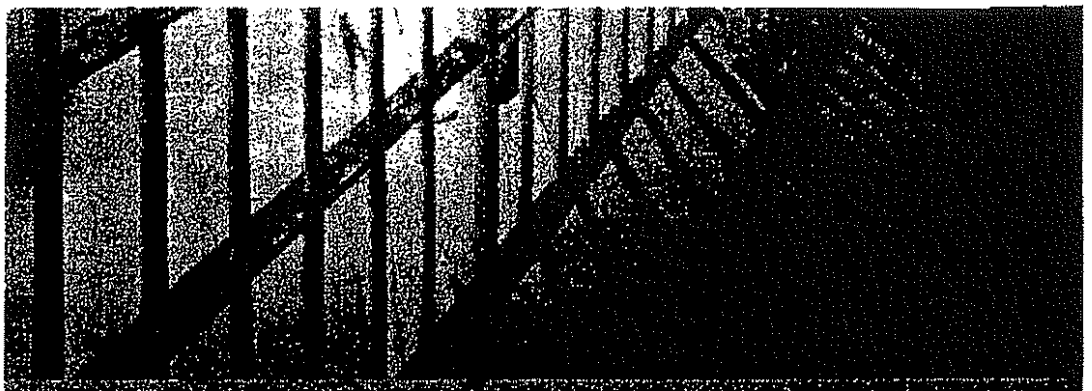

CRIME POLICY REPORT
Vol. 3, September 2001

Prisoner Reentry in Perspective

James P. Lynch

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research for safer communities

URBAN INSTITUTE
Justice Policy Center

A - 110

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Contents

Executive Summary

The massive increase in incarceration in the United Stares that occurred during the past 20 years has now turned public attention toward the consequences of releasing large numbers of prisoners back into society. Prisoner reentry has raised questions about public safety, about how corrections systems should manage the volume of releases, and about how communities can absorb and reintegrate the returning prisoners. Very little is known about these matters, yet speculation is rife that the volume of returning prisoners will result in more crime and in more challenges for supervision, and that it will reduce the capacity of communities to absorb ex-prisoners.

In this report, data are presented on changes in characteristics of persons released from prison and of persons on parole, but these measures beg the question of whether reentry involves only those recently released, those under supervision, or the entire volume of persons who have previously been in prison. If rhe latter group is considered, then the scope of reentry expands to include the several million people who have spent time in prison.

The limited data reviewed herein identify several of the complexities associated with prisoner reentry. For example, the volume of offenders released from prison increased dramatically from 1980 to 2000, From about 170,000 to 585,000, but the rare of increase has slowed during the 1990s while the prison population continued to expand. This prison expansion occurred largely through the increase in length of stay in prison. But, as the, data in this reporr show, longer stays in prison are associated with declining frequency of contact with family members, and contact with family members is believed to facilitate reintegration into the community. Moreover, participation in programs in prison decreased during this prison expansion, so a larger number of released prisoners reenter society not having participated in educational, vocational, or pre-release programs.

The increase in the volume of released offenders raises concerns about public safety. Yet, throughout the 1990s, as the annual number of offenders released From prison increased, the aggregate crime

rate actually decreased. Public safety concerns are also raised in relation to the increasing number of offenders released from prison with no conditions of supervision, or unconditionally. On the one hand, the absence of a parole officer can be a detriment to reentry, as parole officers can offer minimal help to ex-prisoners in locating resources. On the other hand, little is known about the actual experiences of offenders released unconditionally. And while concerns are raised that unconditional releases may be among the mostserious offenders, data from some states suggestthat they return to prison at tower rates than those released with supervision.

The experiences with returning prisoners over the past decade suggest further that there has been an increase in the number who chum or recycle through prison and parole. Comparatively few (20 percent) of those who have had a previous experience on parole successfully complete their subsequent term of parole. By contrast, the majority of offenders (75 percent) who are released onto parole for the first time do successfully complete parole. As first and subsequent discharges from parole each account for about half of those completing parole, these parole outcomes suggest that the pool of churners is increasing more rapidly than it is being retired.

The number of persons who enter prison for the first time in their Life has increased in recent years. Many, perhaps most, do not return to prison. All of this suggests that these reentry populations are diverse and that planning for reentry requires addressing the complexities of the population Recent experiences with returning prisoners suggest that some may require more supervision than others and that some may require none.

From the community perspective. released prisoners are concentrated in a few large states and, within these states, are increasingly concentrated in the core counties that contain the central cities of metropolitan areas. Limited data on releases into cities further suggest that, within cities, releases are concentrated within a comparatively few areas or communities. However, these limited data also raise questions about the assumption that the concentrations are limited to the poorest neighborhoods in central cities. Data from Cleveland suggest that a number of the areas with high incarceration (and eventually release) rates are located in or near working-class neighborhoods. Such a geographic dispersion of incarceration and releases is consistent with the thesis about the spread of drug trafficking throughout metropolitan areas. And, such a geographic dispersion also raises questions about the impacts of incarceration and reentry on these more stable neighborhoods. If, as research shows, incarceration is related to lower levels of employment and earnings, then the removal and return of large volumes of ex-prisoners to working-class communities can have potentially negative consequences for these communities,

In sum, this paper shows that the size of the returning prisoner and parole populations has increased, but rhat funding for supervision has not kept pace. It shows that there have been marginal changes in the composition of the population of reentering inmates that *can* make reentry more difficult than it' has been, but at rhe same rime, we have yet to observe in the aggregate data many of the adverse consequences predicted. So while inmates reentering society now are more likely (1) to have failed at parole previously; (2) not to have participated in educational and vocational programs in prison; and (3) to have served longer sentences, which attenuates ties to families, it may also be the case that large numbers of persons who enter prison for the first time in their lives do not return to prison. And, while returns from prison are concentrated in a comparatively small number of urban communities. these communities may be fairly diverse and include both areas of concentrated poverty as well as working-class communities. Finally, within the metropolitan areas to which ex-prisoners are returning, access to jobs and competition with welfare Lavers for skill-appropriate jobs may impose further constrainrs on the capacity of communities to reintegrate ex-prisoners.

tions official makes a decision; in the Massachusetts case, self-selection operates. In the case of Texas, experience suggests that unconditional releases may pose less risk than commonly believed. Still, little is known about the experiences of unconditional releases from these systems. Moreover, these four examples do not represent the practices among the 50 states and the District of Columbia. as the release of offenders unconditionally varies widely among states (Travis, Solomon, Waul 2001).

The decrease in overall time served on parole has contributed to the slowing of the growth of the parole

A second major factor contributing to a slowing of the growth of t e p l pop l a is a decrease in the length of time served on p ims on le for all parolees decreased slightly, by about one-and-a-half months, from about 21 months in 1993 to just under 20 months in 1998. At the same time, time served on parole by first discharges from prison increased over h p from about 19 months to 22 months.[14] Thus, the source of the decrease in overall time served on parole is among subsequent discharges from prison onto parole. In 1998, subsequent discharges served fewer th a 16 months on p l on g He i on p for i ub-groups appears to be moving in different directions.

on parole are being created at a faster rate than they are successfully completing parole

The chances of successfully completing parole dif- r ked u offenders fi s rg l a pa role and those subsequently discharged. A first discharge from l occurs h an ffend leased fr a pris for the first time on a sentence, is discharged from parole, either successfully or unsuccessfully. A subsequent l charge from parole occurs when an offender ho pre ously served ti on parole was returned to p isc n fc a technical violation, was released from prison for a second time on h original sentence, and subsequently is dis :h ge from p l i fu ly or full

I 1996, about 48 percent of all discharges from parole were subsequent di harge ; this represents an increase from 40 percent in 1986. Of offenders subse que d f parole in 1996, only 20 percent suc h o pl t le hi 80 percent were unsuccessful B cl 1999, table 18). By contrast, of offenders discharged from parole for the first time in 1996, 75 percent completed parole successfully, while 25 percent were unsuccessful. To the extent that failures on first parole result in subsequent parole. the comparatively low 25 percent failure race, whencompared with the very low 20 percent success rate of subsequent parolees, implies. that churners are being created at a faster rate than they are successfully completing parole.

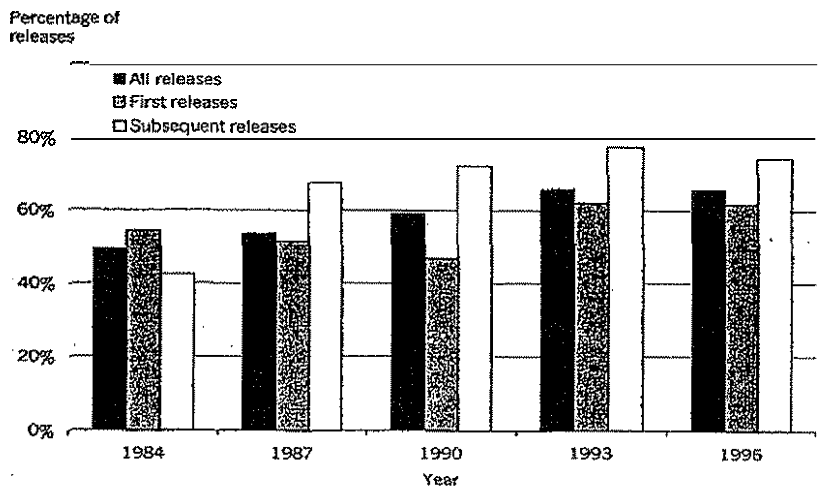
The parole outcomes suggest that a key to successful reentry is successful completion of parole the *first time an offender is released from prison onto parole.* Failure on parole is more likely w occur as a result of a technical violation than a return for a new crime. For example, of persons who left parole unsuccessfully during 1998 and who were returned to prison, 53 percent were returned because of technical violations while 24 percent were returned for new crimes-" Thus, while the use of technical violations is associated with the creation of churners. their use also may contribute to reductions in new crimes. The implications of technical violations for reentry deserve more attention

RETURNING TO COMMUNITIES

For communities, the return of released prisoners potentially poses problem for public safety and challenges for reintegrating people in w society. The changes in the composition of returning prisoners outlined above suggest that there is not a single type of reintegration problem. There are more violent offenders returning to communities, more offenders *coming* back from rheir first experience with incarceration, and more offenders returning after a churning experience. Offenders have been out of the community for longer periods, and they arc less likely m have participated in education and training programs. Communities, therefore, face a complicated set of problems related to reintegrating offenders.

Discussions about the return and reintegration of ex-prisoners into communities often occur under the presumption that communities want to accept and reintegrate ex-prisoners. This may be aviable assumption; however, surveys of residents in local neighborhoods also show that public safety is their top concern (e.g., Anderson and Milli 2001). And, given that many offenders who were removed from communities committed serious violent crimes, it is not immediately obvious h a co u nities would want all offenders to return to the places they lived before their incarceration. If the presumptions of programs

Figure 7
Estimated percentage of offenders released into core counties, by type of release, 1984 1996



Source: Lynch/Sabol analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics *National Corrections Reporting Program* data, 1984 96.

based on the Weed and Seed model are correct that the weeding out of offenders must occur prior to seeding prevention efforts then the return of violent offenders may be like sowing weeds back into communities.

While communities may not necessarily want ex-prisoners to return to them, the presumption that communities want to accept all returning prisoners is one that needs to be verified. Because little, if anything, is known about the attitudes of community residents toward returning offenders, in general, and toward the return of specific offenders, it makes sense to presume that communities may not want all offenders back. At Last this is a testable assumption. the results of which can help develop new approaches, to reintegrating difficult or unwanted offenders, while at the same time help to preserve public safety.

t h e geographic concentrations of returning prisoners

Cohorts of returning prisoners are concentrated in a few large states. Of prisoners released in 1998, five states accounted for just under half of the 531,000 offenders released. California alone accounted for 24 percent of the state prison releases (but only 12 percent of the U.S. resident population), The top 16 states (in terms of the volume of releases) collectively accounted for 75 percent of the releases, but the bottom 24 states collectively accounted for only 10 percent of state prison releases. Among these relatively low-frequency release states, the number released ranged from about 4,500 in Mississippi to about GW in Maine.

Within states, returning prisoners are increasingly concentrated in core counties. A core county is one that contains the central city of a metropolitan area. The estimated percentage of state prison releases in core counties of metropolitan areas rose from 50 percent in 1984 to 66 percent in 1996 (figure 7). In other words, about half of the 220,000 releases in 1984 were to core counties, while about two-thirds of the 500,000 releases in 1996 were to core counties. Thus, both the volume and wncentration of returns to core counties have increased over time.

Concentrations within core counties the Cuyahoga County case

Within core counties, the concentrations may be even more pronounced because releases are likely to be concentrated in a relatively few neighborhoods within the central cities of the core counties. Research by Rose and Clear (1598) documents the concentrations of released offenders within a few Tallahassee, Florida, neighborhoods. Recent data from Ohio also highlight the extreme concentrations of offenders within neighborhoods.

The Ohio data are of persons in prison on July 1, 2000, and who resided in Cuyahoga County the core county containing the city of Cleveland. Of all offenders in Ohio prisons, 20 percent of them resided in Cuyahoga County (which accounts for 12 percent of the state s population) before they were incarcerated. Of those who resided in the county, anestimared 75 percent resided in the city .of Cleveland before their incarceration.

Using census block groups[16] arbitrarily w define a neighborhood or community, 50 block groups out of 1,539 such block groups in the county accounted for about one-fifth of all prisoners, or, in other words, 3 percent of the county s block groups accounted for about 20 percent of the states prisoners. Forty-eight of these block groups were within the city of Cleveland.

One-day incarceration rates were computed for all blockgroupsin the County. High-rate block groups were defined as those with a calculated one-day incarceration rate of more than 0.75 percent of the resident population.[17] Within the high-rate block groups, the estimated one-day incarceration rate averaged about 1.5 percent of the population; for black men between the ages of 18 and 29, the estimated one-day incarceration rate was between 8 and 15percent.

Finally, assuming the data on admissions and time sewed for the entire state of Ohio apply to the data for the high-rate block groups,[18] an estimate can be derived of the number of offenders that.can be expected to return to the 48 high-rate block groups in Cleveland. That is, between 350 and 700 offendersper year.

The location of the hiih-rate block groups within the city raises questions about the presumption that returning prisoners are concentrated in the poorest neighborhoods. While many of the high-rate and moderate-rate block groups are located in or near some of the poorest areas of Cleveland, a large number are not. Rather, high-rare areas are located in or near working-class neighborhoods. For example, in the southeast section of Cleveland, there are many working-class neighborhoods that, during the late 1990s, received large numbers of conventional loans for purchase and renovation of homes. In and around these same neighborhoods are many high-incarcerarion rate block groups. Additionally, a well-known drug trafficking corridor runs through this area.

These neighborhoods may be affected by the dispersion of the drug trafficking trade throughout the metropolitan area (Blumstein 1995). Accordingly, many of the incarcerated residents dealt drugs. but they did so along the corridor or in areas outside of their neighborhoods of residence. Certainly,much more researchneeds to be done to identify the communities within which large numbers of offenders are returning and research is.also needed on how their return will affect the communities.

Churners are returning to core counties in higher concentrations than previously

As shown previously, offenders whn have failed on parole are at higher risk of falling again. These offenders are increasingly concentrated in core counties. In 1984, an estimated 42 percent of subsequent releases offenders released for at least the second time on an original sentence returned to a core county. By 1996, this increased to an estimated 75 percent (figure 7).

Currently, churners are primarily drug and property offenders rather than violent offenders. The proportion of drug offenders admitted to prison with a prior prison history increased from 22 percent in the period 1985 to 1989 to 37 percent in the period 1995 to 1998. The increase for property crime was less extreme 34 percent to 41 percent. In contrast, the proportion of violent offenders with a prior prison history changed little across the periods.

Social and familial attachments of soon-to-be-released offenders

Returning prisoners attachments to society, such as employment and family relationships, are relatively weakbutdidnotchanged substantially during the 1990s. Prior to the 1990s, there were changes in the social and familial attachments of prisoners, largely because of the increased incarceration of drug offenders (Lynch and Sabol 1997). The comparison of four measures of social integration among a cohort of soon-to-be-released offenders for 1991 and 1997, shown in table 3, shows minimal change in reported marital status, education, employment. and children:

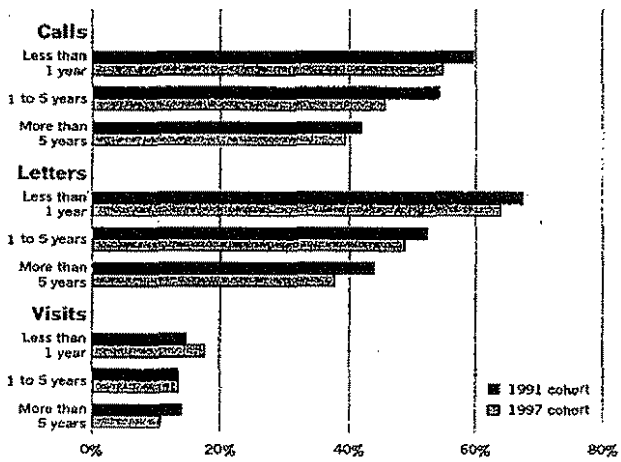
- About one-quarter of the offenders were divorced and nearly 60 percent had never married.

Table 3.
Offenders to be released in the next 12 months, by measure of social integration and year, 1991 and 1997

	1991	1997
Children		
Yes	63.7%	66.7%
No	36.3	33.3
Working		
Yes	65.5%	66.5%
No	34.5	33.5
Education		
8 years or less	18.9%	17.1%
8 11 years	47.1	50.4
12 years	22.3	21.7
College plus	11.8	10.9
Marital Status		
Married	17.8%	15.9%
Formerly married	24.9	25.4
Never married	57.3	58.8

Source: Lynch/Sabol analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics *Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities, 1991 and 1997.*

Figure 8.
Offenders to be released in the next 12 months: Percentage with weekly contact with children, by method and length of stay, 1991 and 1997



Source: Lynch/Sabol analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics *Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities, 1991 and 1997.*

- About two-thirds of the offenders had children.
- About one-third of the offenders were unemployed prior to prison entry.
- About two-thirds of the offenders had not completed high school.

As shown previously, however, time served by offenders released from prison has increased over time. Here, increasing time served in prison is negatively related to maintaining attachments to family members. Specifically, the frequency of contact with children decreases as the length of time served in prison increases (figure 8). For soon-to-be-released offenders in 1997, for example, among inmates who ever had contact with their children, 54 percent of those expecting release after serving one year or less reported at least weekly calls from their children. This decreases to 45 percent among those to be released after serving one to five years, and to 39 percent among those to be released after serving five or more years.[19] The same pattern is observed for receiving letters and visits from children.

Changes in family contacts with inmates reflect both self-selection and access to prisoners. It is not known whether contacts decrease because offenders or families choose not to continue to contact each other, or because prison policies limit access. For example, if offenders are incarcerated in facilities that are far away from their residences, or if telephone or other privileges are restricted, then prison policies can affect access. To the extent that contacts with families facilitate reintegration a relationship about which we know little then policies should attempt to minimize the disruption of these contacts.

Additionally, the likelihood of being divorced increases with time served. For soon-to-be-released offend-

ers in 1997, 16 percent of those expecting release after serving one year or less reported being divorced. This increases to 17 percent among those to be released after serving one to five years, and to 20 percent among chose to be released after serving five or more years.[20]

Macroeconomic matters

The pre-prison employment experiences and education levels of ex-offenders are low relative to the nonincarcerated population. The largest share of prisoners released into urban areas is black, and the joint effects of race and a prison sentence as thev relate to employerdiscriminationofex-prisonersare not fully known (Kirschcnman and Neckerman 1991) but may not portend well for black ex-prisoners.

Further complicating post-prison employment are several macroeconomic matters. For example, there may be a spatial mismatch between the residence ofex-prisonen and the location of skill-appropriate jobs. The data to measure offenders access to jobs ace not readily available; hence, this discussionissomewhat speculative. However, if, as it appears, there is a spatid mismatch between the residences of returning offenders and the location of skill-appropriatejobs, this mismatch could compound the considerable problem ofex-prisoner employment.

Returning offenders are increasingly concentrated withincore counties and, to the extent that Tallahassee and Cleveland represent patterns in other urban areas, are increasingly within the central cities of core counties. During the past decade, central cities, despite job growth in some, have lost labor market share relative to the suburbs (Brennan and Hill 1999). For example, in the Cleveland area, between 1975 and the mid-1990s employment within the city of Cleveland grew by less than 2 percent while employment in the suburbs grew by 121 percent. At the same time, employment in manufacturing a comparatively low-skillbut high-wage sector declined from 30 percent of all employment to 15 percent (Bania, Coulton, Leete 2000).

Returning prisoners may be competing with those leaving welfare for the same low-skilljobs. While metropolitan labor markets have generally been able to absorb the large volume of welfare leavers (Lerman and Ratcliffe 2000), reductions in welfare caseloads have been lower in core counties than in surrounding suburbs. These are the same areas with large concentrations of returning prisoners. Moreover, the jobs available to either group. welfare leavers or returning prisoners, may not provide the wages needed to raise families above the poverty level. For example, among recent welfare leavers in Cuyahoga County, about half had continuous employment during the first six months after leaving welfare, but half of these did not earn enough to raise a family of three above the poverty level. Finally, economic downturns can affect employment prospects (Coulton, et al. 2000). The skill-appropriate jobs for ex-prisoners tend robe the same type of low-wagellow-skilljobs that are most likely to be adversely affected by economic downturns (Smith and Woodbury 1999).

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The current interest in reentry and the call for new policy attention are based on the implicit assumption that the absorption of former inmates into society is different now than it has been One purpose of this paper was to assess how the current problem of reentry may differ from that of the past. The other purpose of this paper was to suggest what more we would want to know about reentry to guide the search for an appropriate response.

Stability and change in reentry

Over the past two decades, the reentry phenomenon has changed in some respects and remained stable in others. The number of prisoners released each year and the size of the parole population have grown, but their growth rates are declining. Parole resources have not kept pace with increases in the parole population, although in recent years they may be catching up. Parolees, especially subsequent parolees, are less likely to successfully complete parole than in the past.

The rates of successful completion of parole between prisoners released for the first time as opposed to those released after previous failures while on parole have become very different over time. The successful completion rate for subsequent releases is much lower than for those initially released to supervision. The increasingly prominent role of technical violations in the successful completion of parole is also noteworthy. It is not clear whether this is due to changes in the nature of the release cohort for example. greater propottions of drug charges or drug addiction or to changes in supervision policy for example, revocation as a response to increases in caseloads and the absence of alternatives.